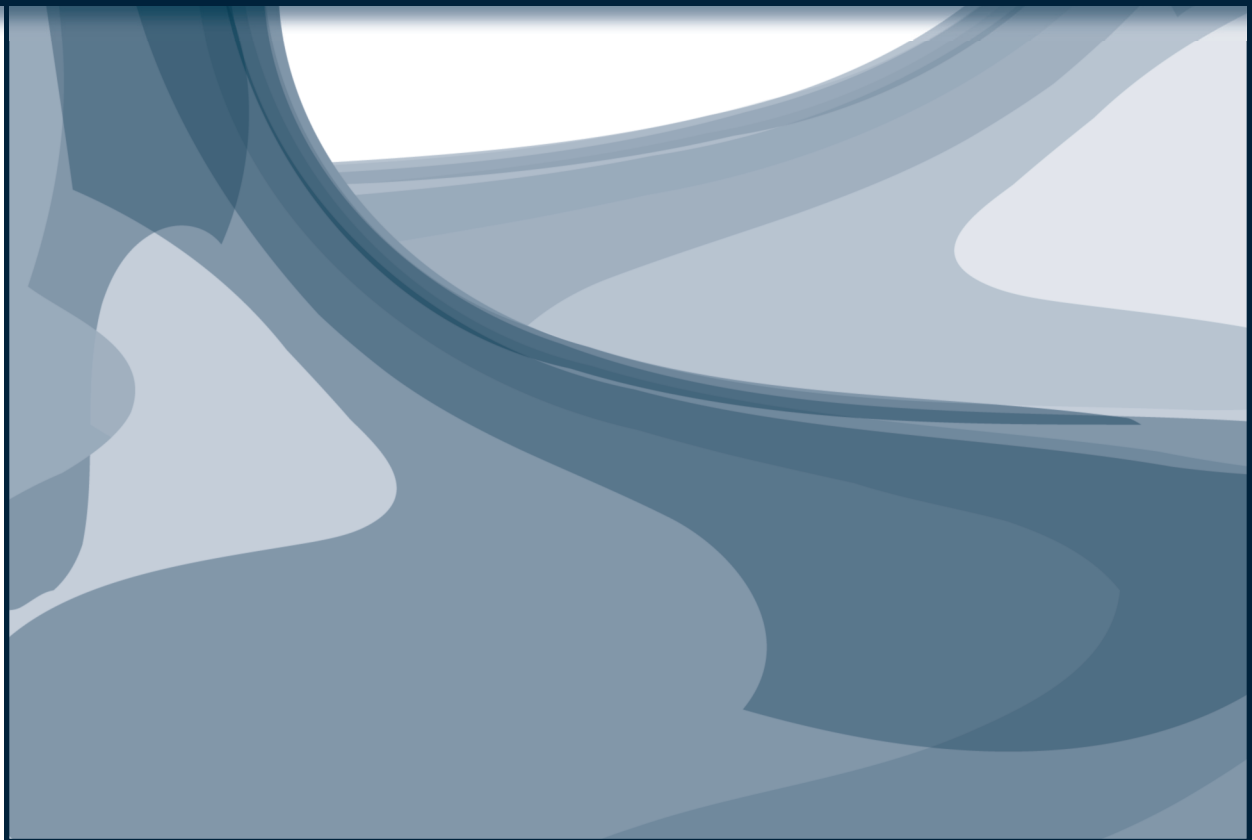


# IMPROVING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

LESSONS FROM FIVE YEARS OF STUDYING SCHOOL  
RESTRUCTURING UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND



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# IMPROVING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

## LESSONS FROM FIVE YEARS OF STUDYING SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

### Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) put in place a process for identifying persistently low-performing schools and requiring them to undergo “restructuring.” In particular, schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in meeting their state’s reading and mathematics achievement targets for five years must develop restructuring plans. If they fall short of AYP targets for an additional year, they must implement these plans. NCLB requires districts to choose one of five options for their schools in restructuring, such as replacing school staff or contracting with an outside organization to run the school. Federal guidance emphasizes the need for schools to make dramatic changes in response to restructuring but leaves many of the details of decision making and implementation to districts and schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

This report synthesizes findings from five years of state-level research and local case studies of school restructuring by the Center on Education Policy (CEP). Our research began in Michigan in the summer and fall of 2004 and gradually expanded to include five additional states—California, Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Ohio—as well as 23 districts and 48 schools in the six states. More than 260 state officials, local administrators, teachers, and other school staff have been interviewed for these studies.

This report addresses three main questions:

1. What have we learned from our local case studies about how to improve struggling schools?
2. What have we learned from our state-level research about the impact of NCLB and related state policies on state efforts to improve schools?
3. From this knowledge, what advice can we offer for using the \$3.5 billion appropriated in 2009 for federal school improvement grants?

### Key Findings and Recommendations

#### Local Strategies for Improving Low-Performing Schools

Several common findings have emerged from our local case studies of school restructuring in six geographically diverse states:

- ***All of the case study schools that raised achievement enough to exit restructuring used multiple, coordinated strategies, which they revised over time.*** Study participants from schools that exited restructuring typically reported using multifaceted approaches to restructuring designed specifically to address their schools’ and students’ needs. Furthermore, none of the participants from schools that exited restructuring said that implementing restructuring had solved all their schools’ problems. Instead, these schools revisited their strategies and changed them to adapt to new needs and funding situations.
- ***All case study schools that exited restructuring used data frequently to make decisions about instruction and regroup students by skill level.*** While all of the schools we studied reported using data to make decisions about instruction, those that exited restructuring typically used data for this purpose more frequently. In fact, study participants in all schools that exited restructuring reported that teachers looked at student assessment data at least once a month, and participants in all but one of these schools said teachers reviewed data at least this often to regroup students by skill level.
- ***Replacing staff helped improve many schools but sometimes had unintended negative consequences.*** All but one of the case study schools that exited restructuring replaced some staff. Most of these schools had a large pool of applicants, a plan or vision for the school that allowed it to overcome its past reputation as a “failing” school, support from the teachers’ union to resolve any contractual issues, and effective hiring systems that did not rely on

principals alone to recruit and interview applicants. About half of the case study schools that did not exit restructuring also replaced some staff, but many of these schools encountered difficulties. Some principals in these schools reported being unable to replace staff with qualified teachers. Others spent so much time over the summer hiring staff that they had little time to plan for the new school year and therefore got off to a rocky start. Finally, union regulations sometimes compromised successful restaffing.

- ***Most case study schools that did not exit restructuring used similar strategies but experienced setbacks or needed more time or information.*** Many schools lost key staff members who were supposed to implement the strategies, and some had changes in student populations that made the strategies more difficult to implement. Other schools may need more time to implement strategies—particularly those that have had insufficient time to apply strategies that have been successful after several years in other restructuring schools in their districts. In a few schools, study participants did not know why their school had not improved and were seeking more information.

### Impact of NCLB and Related State Policies on School Improvement

Our state-level research also revealed common findings about the impact of NCLB and related state policies on state efforts to improve low-performing schools:

- ***Differences in state accountability systems have led to uneven and sometimes unmanageable numbers of schools in restructuring.*** States have different accountability systems, tests, AYP requirements, and criteria for identifying schools for improvement and restructuring, so that a school identified in one state might not be in improvement if it were located in another state. As a result, the number of restructuring schools varies widely from state to state for reasons unrelated to their relative quality of education. This unevenness also means that some states must spread federal school improvement dollars and state supports over a large number of schools, while other states can target more resources on fewer schools. Some states with a great many schools in improvement lack the capacity to assist all of them, which can hinder improvement efforts.
- ***Federal restructuring strategies have not shown promise, and all six states in our studies have moved away from these options.*** Our analysis of state test scores in these six states revealed that no federal strategy was associated with a greater likelihood of a school making AYP. All six states have deemphasized the federal restructuring options to a degree. Four of these states (Georgia, New York, Ohio, and Maryland) are piloting differentiated accountability systems and have either replaced the federal options with a collection of state-designated strategies for schools in the last stage of improvement or have made the federal strategies a smaller part of a broader set of reform requirements. Two of these states (California and Michigan) are not piloting differentiated accountability but have still shifted some of the emphasis away from the federal options toward state-determined supports and strategies.
- ***All six states have begun targeting supports to the most academically needy schools or districts.*** The four states with differentiated accountability systems have used the flexibility available in these pilots to offer more support to schools that missed AYP targets for students as a whole and less support to schools that missed AYP targets for fewer subgroups. The other two states have also targeted supports to particular schools or districts. California has focused on districts with the most severe and pervasive needs rather than on schools that missed AYP targets solely due to subgroup performance. Michigan requires comprehensive audits of schools that missed AYP targets for students as a whole and audits focused on subgroup needs in schools that have missed AYP targets only for English language learners or students with disabilities.
- ***All six states have leveraged additional support for schools in improvement by relying on partnerships with other agencies and organizations.*** These partnerships, which have developed partly in response to limited state capacity, provide resources and support to restructuring schools. The types of partners and relationships vary from state to state,

but often include regional educational agencies and other public partners, as well as nonprofit and for-profit organizations that specialize in technical assistance and professional development for educators. Georgia has consulted with a nonprofit to help develop the state's strategies for restructuring. Maryland and Ohio have used outside organizations to assist newly created school-improvement entities within their own departments of education. Michigan does much of its on-site support of schools by partnering with regional government agencies that provide technical assistance. California and New York have offered contracts to a wider variety of entities, including government agencies, nonprofits, and for-profits, to provide schools with support.

- ***All six states have increased their use of needs assessments to diagnose challenges in restructuring schools.*** California, Georgia, and Ohio have instituted tighter requirements for needs assessments specifically for districts or schools with the greatest academic needs, which often include schools in restructuring. New York, Maryland, and Michigan have instituted more specific data requirements of all schools, including those in restructuring.
- ***All six states have increased on-site monitoring or visits to restructuring schools.*** The six states we studied have taken advantage of the new differentiated accountability pilots or the existing flexibility in NCLB to require on-site visits by state officials or their representatives to at least some schools identified for restructuring. Specifically, Georgia, Michigan, and New York require some type of on-site monitoring for all schools in restructuring. California, Maryland, and Ohio focus on-site visits on the schools or districts they deem to be most needy.
- ***Funding increases for school improvement grants under the Title I program for disadvantaged children may help schools improve.*** Participants in our studies at all levels typically called for more funding for school improvement. In the coming years, \$3.5 billion has been allocated specifically for federal school improvement grants authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act, as amended by NCLB. The majority of this funding was appropriated through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the rest through the regular education appropriations bill.

## Recommendations

CEP offers the following recommendations based on our research on school improvement and restructuring under NCLB:

- ***Federal policymakers should consider raising or waiving the 5% cap on the amount of Title I improvement funds states can reserve for state activities to help schools in improvement, but should allow flexibility in the actions states take to assist schools.*** Increasing this cap would ensure that states have sufficient funds to carry out the school improvement supports they deem necessary. However, because none of the approaches being used by the states we studied has been subject to extensive research, the federal government should not mandate any particular state approach to school improvement. Instead, the federal government should allow experimentation accompanied by evaluations of the impact of new approaches.
- ***States should consider using their portion of federal school improvement funds to experiment with promising practices identified in CEP studies.*** These practices include:
  - Targeting supports to schools that are the most academically needy
  - Building partnerships with regional government agencies and other organizations to support direct technical assistance to restructuring schools
  - Increasing the use of needs assessment to help diagnose schools' challenges and plan improvement
  - Increasing on-site visits to restructuring schools
- ***Schools and districts should tailor their improvement efforts to individual school needs.*** Schools and districts should also consider the following promising practices identified in CEP studies:

- Using multiple, coordinated reform strategies that are well matched to the needs of the school and students
- Evaluating and revising reform efforts over time in response to school and student needs
- Analyzing data frequently and using it to regroup students for instruction
- Replacing staff, but only if the school or district has a large pool of applicants, a plan or vision for the school that allows it to overcome its past reputation as a “failing” school, help from the union to resolve stumbling blocks in the contract, and effective hiring systems that do not rely on principals alone to recruit and interview applicants
- ***Local, state, and federal support of schools that exit restructuring should continue for several years afterward.*** Study participants from schools that had exited restructuring were typically concerned about maintaining high levels of student achievement. In fact, one school that had exited has now been re-identified for improvement. To sustain the progress that has been made, supports and reforms undertaken during restructuring should continue and evolve after schools exit restructuring.
- ***Local, state, and federal officials should join forces to evaluate improvement strategies.*** Researchers and policymakers have yet to identify a foolproof way of improving schools. While CEP studies and other research point to promising practices, there is no formula that guarantees success. In this climate, it is important to gather as much information from evaluations as possible about school improvement efforts, including their impact on school performance and student achievement. Using this information will aid leaders in designing policies that help schools improve and avoid policies that hinder success.

## Study Methods and Background

This report synthesizes CEP studies of school restructuring under NCLB conducted from 2004 through 2009 by four CEP consultants: Caitlin Scott, Elizabeth Duffrin, Maureen Kelleher, and Brenda Neuman-Sheldon. Over the five years of the studies, the number of states participating expanded to include six states, 23 districts, and 48 schools in 2008-09, listed in **table 1**.

**Table 1. States, districts, and schools participating in CEP’s restructuring studies**

District	District Type	School	Years in NCLB Improvement 2008-09	Years in NCLB Improvement 2009-10	Years in CEP Studies
<b>California</b> (participated since 2005-06)					
Oakland Unified	Urban	Education for Change Cox Elementary (charter)	8	9	4
		New Highland Elementary	8	8	4
		Sobranite Park Elementary	0*	0*	4
		Whittier/Greenleaf Elementary†	7/0†	8/0†	4
Palmdale Union	Suburban	Palm Tree Elementary	0*	1	3
		Yucca Elementary	8	9	4
Tahoe Truckee Unified	Rural	North Tahoe Middle	7	7	4
Twin Rivers Unified (formerly Grant Joint Union)	Suburban	Martin Luther King Junior High	8	9	4
		Grant Union High School	7	8	4

*Continued*

**Table 1. Continued**

District	District Type	School	Years in NCLB Improvement 2008-09	Years in NCLB Improvement 2009-10	Years in CEP Studies
Georgia (participated since 2007-08)					
Atlanta Public Schools	Urban	Long Middle	5	0*	2
		Kennedy Middle	7	0*	2
		BEST Academy	8	8	1
		Coretta Scott King Young Women's Leadership Academy	8	8	1
Grady County School District	Rural	Washington Middle School	7	7	1
Muscogee County School District	Urban	Baker Middle	8	9	2
		Eddy Middle	9	10	2
Stewart County School District	Rural	Stewart-Quitman High School	8	9	2
Maryland (participated since 2005-06)					
Anne Arundel County Public Schools	Suburban	Annapolis High School	0*	0*	3
Baltimore City Public Schools	Urban	Guilford Elementary/Middle	8	0*	3
		Mary E. Rodman Elementary	9	10	3
		Morrell Park Elementary/ Middle	6	0*	3
		Thurgood Marshall High School	8	9 (closed)	3
Baltimore County Public Schools†	Suburban	Woodlawn Middle	5	0*	4
Prince George's County Public Schools	Suburban	Arrowhead Elementary	5	6	3
		Charles Carroll Middle	9	10	3
Michigan (participated since 2004-05)					
Detroit Public Schools	Urban	William Beckham Elementary Academy	6	7	3
		Cervený Middle	0*	0* (closed)	3
		Cleveland Intermediate/ High School	8	9 (closed)	3

*Continued*



**Table 1. Continued**

District	District Type	School	Years in NCLB Improvement 2008-09	Years in NCLB Improvement 2009-10	Years in CEP Studies
Michigan (participated since 2004-05)					
Flint Community Schools	Urban	Central Foundations Academy	7 (closed)	(closed) <sup>§</sup>	2
		Holmes Middle School	5	6	1
		Central High School	5	6 (closed)	1
		Northwestern High School	4	5	1
Harrison Community Schools	Rural	Hillside Elementary	0 <sup>*</sup>	0 <sup>*</sup>	5
Willow Run Community Schools	Suburban	Willow Run Middle	0 <sup>*</sup>	0 <sup>*</sup>	5
		Willow Run High School	5	6	2
Ohio (participated since 2007-08)					
Cincinnati Public Schools	Urban	Taft Elementary (K-8)	9	10	2
Cleveland Metropolitan School District	Urban	East High School	5	6	2
		East Technical High School	5	6	2
		Marshall High School	5	6	2
Mansfield City Schools	Urban	Newman Elementary	4	0 <sup>*</sup>	2
Mount Vernon City Schools	Rural	Malabar Middle School	5	6	2
		Mount Vernon Middle	4	5	2
New York (participated since 2008-09)					
Central Islip Union Free School District	Suburban	Reed Middle School	7	0 <sup>*</sup>	1
		Central Islip Senior High	6	7	1
New York City	Urban	PS 24 Elementary School	5	6	1
		El Puente Academy	5	6	1
Syracuse	Urban	Seymour Elementary School	6	7	1
		Grant Middle School	8	9	1

Table reads: In California, four school districts—Oakland Unified, Palmdale Union, Tahoe Truckee Unified, and Twin Rivers Unified—have participated in CEP’s studies of restructuring since 2005-06. In Oakland, Education for Change Cox Elementary School has participated in CEP’s studies for four years; this school was in year 8 of school improvement in 2008-09 and is in year 9 of improvement in school year 2009-10.

\* Schools in “year 0” had previously been in restructuring but had exited school improvement.

<sup>†</sup> Whittier Elementary is being phased out and replaced by a new school, Greenleaf Elementary, in the same building but with a different student population.

<sup>‡</sup> The Baltimore County Schools, which had participated in previous CEP studies of restructuring, declined to participate in 2008-09.

<sup>§</sup> Central Foundations Academy closed at the end of 2007-08, so there was no testing in 2008-09 on which to base school improvement status.

Sources: CEP, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d; 2009e; 2009f.

Our research is based largely on interviews with state department of education officials and with district- and school-level administrators, teachers, and other staff in all six states—more than 260 people over the course of the studies. In these interviews, individuals reflected on their efforts to improve schools, the results of these efforts, and the effects of NCLB policies. In addition, we analyzed restructuring documents and data from the state, district, and school levels in the six states. More detailed information about school improvement efforts in the individual states and districts can be found in CEP’s reports on restructuring, which were issued over multiple years and are available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).<sup>1</sup>

CEP chose to study restructuring in these six states because they had already begun implementing test-based accountability systems and calculating AYP under the federal law that preceded NCLB. As a result, these states had schools reach the restructuring phase of NCLB sooner than most other states. As other states seek to improve low-performing schools, they can learn from the successes and challenges of these states in the vanguard.

Districts participating in CEP’s restructuring studies were chosen with guidance from the six state departments of education. In the initial year of each state study, we asked the state department of education to provide a list of districts that were implementing restructuring strategies as intended by the state. We invited districts to participate that represented both the variety of communities served by restructuring schools across the state and the diversity of approaches being used to restructure schools. In districts with more than one school in restructuring, local district personnel chose the schools to participate in CEP’s studies.

Two districts were added to the studies—Grady County School District in Georgia and the Detroit Public Schools in Michigan—after these districts’ efforts in restructuring schools came to the attention of CEP researchers. In several instances, individual schools were dropped from or added to the studies, typically because schools closed or started new and noteworthy restructuring efforts. More details on these changes are available in our state reports.

Because the districts and schools participating in our studies were chosen based in part on the advice of state and district officials, they are likely to overrepresent those that took restructuring seriously. One might therefore assume that these schools would be largely successful in restructuring, but this wasn’t always the case. Of the 48 schools that participated in 2008-09, 11 had raised achievement enough to exit NCLB improvement by 2009-10, 31 had not exited, 5 had closed, and 1 that had previously exited restructuring found itself back in school improvement again in 2009-10 after not making AYP for two consecutive years.

This variation in the improvement status of schools is actually a strength of our research, however, because it allows us to compare schools that successfully exited NCLB improvement and those that did not. Other studies have been criticized for examining only schools that have raised student achievement enough to exit improvement, a research approach that makes it impossible to determine whether the strategies cited by school officials as critical to their improvement are actually present in all schools or are unique to improving schools (Herman et al., 2008).

Our analysis does have some limitations because schools were not randomly selected to implement particular strategies, and the implementation was not monitored. We did, however, interview many people in each school and district, sometimes over multiple years, which helps ensure that our data are reliable. While our findings cannot be generalized to all schools, they can help inform educators and policy-makers working to improve low-performing schools.

## What Have We Learned from Our Local Case Studies about How to Improve Struggling Schools?

Using data collected from schools and districts in the six states we studied, we were able to compare schools that raised achievement enough to exit restructuring and those that did not. Several lessons emerged about promising strategies and processes and ways to overcome challenges. Each of these lessons is discussed

<sup>1</sup> These include five reports in Michigan (CEP, 2004; 2005; 2007b; 2008b; 2009c); four reports each on California (CEP, 2006a; 2007a; 2008a; 2009a) and Maryland (CEP 2006b; 2007c; 2008e; 2009b); two reports each on Georgia (2008c; 2009d) and Ohio (2008d; 2009e); and one report on New York (2009f).



below. The data must be interpreted cautiously, however, because schools that have exited restructuring still face challenges in maintaining high student achievement, especially as AYP targets continue to rise toward the NCLB goal of 100% proficiency in 2014.

**Finding: All case study schools that successfully exited restructuring reported using multiple, coordinated improvement activities.**

Study participants at the state and local levels typically reported that a single reform strategy did not bring their schools out of improvement. As California State Superintendent Jack O'Connell said in a speech at a state symposium in 2007-08, "I wish there was a one size fits all solution, but there isn't." In fact, all six states in our studies encourage low-performing schools to use specific needs assessments to identify and address the multiple challenges particular to their school.

Our interviews with district and school staff confirmed that schools were using multi-faceted approaches to restructuring. None of the staff interviewed in the case study schools that exited restructuring could point to a single strategy they believed was the only thing needed to improve student achievement. In the Atlanta Public Schools, for example, two middle schools exited restructuring based on 2008-09 tests; both had undertaken multiple reforms over several years. Restructuring in Atlanta was largely a continuation of district initiatives but with stepped-up monitoring and support, explained Kathy Augustine, the district's deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "[Even] before No Child Left Behind, we were very focused on a standards-driven curriculum and teachers teaching to standards, using a variety of research-based practices," she said.

Both of these Atlanta middle schools provided professional development to teachers on how to organize curricula around state standards, analyze student test results, and tailor instruction to students' needs. Both schools also implemented a comprehensive school reform model called Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), which incorporates research-based instructional programs such as Success for All in reading and MOVE It Math. The schools also benefited from visits by a state math facilitator who modeled

good instruction. In addition, the two schools increased their use of student assessments to guide instructional decision making, provided additional instruction for struggling students, and replaced some staff. Other case study schools that exited restructuring implemented a similarly long and detailed list of reforms.

**Finding: All case study schools that successfully exited restructuring reported that their reform efforts had evolved over time.**

Schools that exited restructuring typically modified their reform efforts over time, abandoning some initiatives and adding others. The revisions they made were often in direct response to changing student needs and funding streams.

For example, at Hillside Elementary in Michigan, some initiatives that started when the school was in restructuring have not lasted. The governing board, a group of appointed district and state officials, was quickly disbanded. The principal and the staff said this structure was not effective because it was too removed from the day-to-day activities of the school.

Hillside also lost its school improvement consultant, Nancy Colflesh. During restructuring, Hillside used school improvement funds to hire Colflesh to oversee the initiatives and work with staff to improve collaboration and create professional learning communities. While Principal Barb Elliot said Colflesh is missed at Hillside, she also said she believes that the professional learning communities are now self-sustaining.

Looking to the future, Elliot said the major challenge at Hillside is maintaining the performance of students with disabilities. As part of its restructuring, Hillside emphasized inclusion of special education students in general education classes. Since exiting restructuring, the school has added Response to Intervention, an approach that identifies struggling students and provides them with targeted interventions of increasing intensity. "Traditionally in special education, you worked at the students' level and gave them a lot of time, but there needs to be more of a sense of urgency," Elliot said. She hopes that continuing to stress inclusion and Response to Intervention will bring this urgency and lead to achievement gains for this subgroup.

Sobranter Park Elementary in California provides another example of evolving reform efforts. As of 2006-07, Sobranter Park exited restructuring, and Principal Marco Franco said general classroom instruction was much improved. The next year, the school began focusing not just on general classroom instruction but particularly on catching students who were falling behind. To do this, the school kept its earlier start time as well as an early morning tutoring time for struggling students (both begun during restructuring). In 2007-08, the school also hired an intervention teacher who provided tutoring to small groups of struggling students during the regular school day. The approach worked so well that Franco hired an additional retired teacher to do interventions in 2008-09.

In the 2008-09 school year, Sobranter Park also sharpened its focus on teaching reading comprehension. After examining the school's test scores, Franco said, "reading fluency was going through the roof, but everything else was kind of staying behind." After observing and talking with teachers, Franco said he discovered that teachers did not have time to read all the companion stories in the school's reading curriculum and weren't able to ask in-depth comprehension questions. So, Franco said he used some leftover funds in the budget to pay teachers to read the books over the summer and develop comprehension questions to be used in the next year.

**Finding: All case study schools that successfully exited restructuring reported making frequent use of data to guide decisions about instruction and regroup students.**

All our case study schools and districts said that one of their most important strategies for improving schools was using data for instructional decision making. In schools that exited restructuring, however, interviewees indicated that staff typically used data more intensely or more frequently than in other schools, both to make decisions about instruction for all students and to group students by skill level for particular lessons. All schools that exited restructuring reported that teachers looked at student assessment data at least once a month. In addition, teachers in all but one of the schools that exited restructuring said they used data at least once a month to regroup students by skill level.

Atlanta's Kennedy and Long Middle Schools are examples of schools where participants said frequent data use helped them exit restructuring. Teachers worked together to design and administer weekly assessments, "which gave you an opportunity to go back and reinforce anything that needed to be retaught," explained math teacher LaQuife Vincent.

At Long Middle, teachers tested students monthly against state standards and regrouped them for instruction based on those results, said math teacher Gregory Leap. Teachers at Long also kept spreadsheets to show whether each student had mastered each state standard. Knowing precisely how to help individual students, rather than providing more general remediation, made a difference in standardized test scores this year, he added.

Annapolis High School in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, is another example of how data use guided a successful effort to restructure. In 2006-07, Anne Arundel County Public Schools created an academic steering committee to support Annapolis High School. The committee, which included members of the district executive team, department coordinators, and senior staff, met with school administrators at least quarterly and in some cases monthly. The committee was charged with monitoring school progress and supporting the school's needs by giving administrators direct access to district officials. "We get together and review the data and talk about supports for the school—what's needed, where are they—and we're monitoring their progress," said George Arlotto, the district's chief school performance officer.

**Finding: Replacing staff helped improve many schools but sometimes had unintended negative consequences.**

Among the schools in our studies that exited restructuring, only Woodlawn Elementary in Baltimore County, Maryland, used staff replacement as its official restructuring strategy. However, 10 of the 11 other exited schools in our studies also replaced some staff as part of their interpretation of the option in NCLB that allows schools to undertake "any other major restructuring of a school's governance that produces fundamental reform." About half of the other schools in our studies also replaced some staff members as part of their restructuring, but some did so less successfully than exited schools.

### Characteristics of Successful Staff Replacement

The successful schools that replaced staff had several things in common. Most were located in areas with stable or declining student enrollment and with no teacher and principal shortages and a substantial pool of applicants. Most had a plan or vision for the school that was widely publicized in the community and that allowed the school to overcome its past reputation as a “failing” school and attract enthusiastic, highly-qualified applicants. Most districts negotiated with the union to resolve stumbling blocks in the contract. Finally, most of these successful districts had an effective hiring system in place and did not rely on principals alone to recruit and interview applicants.

For example, Annapolis Senior High School in Maryland replaced school staff in the year before it moved into restructuring. To help with restaffing, the district provided the school with a full complement of supports, including holding a job fair specifically for the school and hiring a temporary co-principal to help manage the school while the principal conducted interviews.

Similarly, Michigan’s Willow Run School District planned for the restaffing of its middle school for a year. Teachers and the community knew that a new building was being constructed and that the school would have a new focus, including small learning communities, new technology, benchmark assessments every three weeks to help teachers shape classroom instruction, and additional periods of math for struggling students in lieu of electives.

Sobrante Park in Oakland, California, was somewhat of an exception. The school did have a vision for restructuring but was located in an area with a dearth of teachers and received little support from the district, which had a staff shortage in human resources at the time. Principal Marco Franco, who had been with the school for many years, anticipated the restaffing and was able to recruit good teachers using his contacts within the district and drawing on his current teachers’ professional friendships.

### Challenges to Staff Replacement

Staff replacement did not go smoothly in all our case study schools. Principals in some restructuring schools reported having difficulty finding enough qualified teachers. For the 2006-07 school year, Highland

Elementary in Oakland tried to restaff but started the year with substitutes in several unfilled positions. Other schools in Detroit spent so much time over the summer of 2007 hiring staff that they had little or no time to plan for the new school year and therefore got off to a rocky start.

In addition, union regulations at times compromised successful restaffing. In Mansfield, Ohio, schools restaffed for restructuring in the same year that there was a general reduction in staff. Teachers bid for open positions in order of seniority as required by contract. An unintended consequence of the seniority-based restaffing was that teachers who were the last to bid for jobs in the restructuring schools often found themselves in grade levels for which they were not highly qualified. For example, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher at Malabar Middle School had been teaching kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade for eight years. Although she had a minor in math, she said the challenges of adolescent students were overwhelming.

In Detroit, layoffs due to declining enrollment adversely affected restructuring schools the year after they replaced staff. Detroit’s Cleveland Intermediate/High School and Cerveney Middle had restructured by hiring younger (and they believed more energetic) teachers who had less seniority with the union. These new hires were among the first to be let go when districtwide layoffs were necessary.

**Finding: Most case study schools that did not exit restructuring said they experienced setbacks or needed more time or information.**

Schools that did not exit restructuring also reported implementing multiple reform strategies, but study participants often said that these schools had experienced setbacks in implementing the strategies or were in an early stage of implementation. Some study participants were unsure why their schools’ strategies had not worked and could benefit from more information.

### Setbacks

Several of the school and district participants in our studies reported that their restructuring schools were not able to fully implement multiple, research-based school improvement strategies due to setbacks that were unexpected or beyond educators’ control. Many schools lost

key staff members who were supposed to implement the strategies. Some had changes in student populations due to new configurations of school boundaries or grade levels, which made the strategies more difficult to implement. To illustrate how these types of setbacks can impact well-intended restructuring strategies, it is useful to compare schools in the same district that implemented similar strategies with dissimilar results.

For example, Palm Tree and Yucca Elementary Schools in California's Palmdale Elementary School District implemented similar strategies, but Palm Tree, which exited restructuring briefly, had a more stable staff and better maintained facilities.

Both schools used district-created benchmark assessments to help teachers plan instruction; both also provided interventions for struggling students during the day using paraprofessionals and offered extended kindergarten. Yucca offered full-day kindergarten, while Palm Tree provided half-day kindergarten with an additional half hour of small-group instruction each day for struggling kindergartners. Both principals also said they had relied on their Reading First grants, which provided coaches, materials, and teacher training, to improve instruction in reading. In addition, teachers at both schools said teacher collaboration had increased since restructuring.

Palm Tree exited restructuring based on 2006-07 testing, but fell back into school improvement in 2008-09 after failing to make AYP for two consecutive years. Yucca has raised student achievement but never enough to make AYP even once.

Compared to Palm Tree, Yucca started with lower student achievement and therefore had further to go to make AYP. In addition, Yucca had three new principals and a great deal of staff turnover in the last three years, while Palm Tree had consistent leadership and more consistent staff. Esmeralda Mondragon, who was principal of Yucca in 2007-08, also noted that Yucca suffered from long-term neglect of facilities, reiterating a point made by the two prior Yucca principals we interviewed. "The playground is really in poor shape," said Mondragon, adding that this sent a negative message to students. In 2008-09, both schools got new principals. (Palm Tree's previous principal moved to Yucca.) Both schools failed to make AYP in 2008-09 in part due to rising state targets.

Another example of the impact of unforeseen setbacks can be found in the Mansfield City district in Ohio, which has implemented a number of school improvement strategies districtwide. The district replaced staff in several schools, partly in response to the closure of four schools and a budget deficit. Mansfield also implemented a new districtwide curriculum in reading and math, new benchmark assessments, and a program to address student behavior and academic performance. In addition, the district provided literacy coaches who visited schools to observe teachers and lead professional development and an outside consultant who trained staff in how to use data to inform instruction and how to build a positive school climate.

Of the two Mansfield schools we studied, Newman Elementary exited restructuring based on its 2008-09 test scores, but Malabar Middle did not. While both schools implemented the districtwide strategies, Malabar staff reported that school year 2007-08 was an unusually challenging one due to the large number of new staff and the behavioral challenges that arose when Malabar was merged with a rival middle school. "When the Simpson kids came here, there should have been some way to integrate them with the Malabar kids. There wasn't, and there's big tension there with the students," said Beverly Whaley, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and math department chair at Malabar. Staff continued to report challenges with managing student behavior in school year 2008-09.

In a third example, two new single-gender middle schools in Atlanta, Georgia, found it challenging to carry out the innovations they had planned in the temporary quarters they occupied while their permanent buildings were being renovated. These two new schools, Coretta Scott King Young Women's Leadership Academy and BEST Academy, were created to replace a troubled middle school that the district had closed. Under the state accountability system, a newly opened school must retain the school improvement status of the former school if at least half of its student enrollment remains the same. The Atlanta district objected, however, to forcing a brand new school to suddenly undergo NCLB restructuring. The state agreed to a compromise: the new schools could avoid being identified for school improvement if they met AYP targets in their first year of existence. This ratcheted up the pressure to improve student achievement. However, the buildings that were intended to house



the new schools were still undergoing renovation in the fall of 2007-08; instead, students were bused to temporary locations outside their neighborhoods.

In 2007-08, the two schools succeeded in making achievement gains while in their temporary quarters, but both missed the AYP target for student attendance. BEST missed the state test score targets as well, but King made a 20 percentage point gain in reading, surpassing the AYP target, and a 10 percentage point gain in math, which would have enabled it to make AYP under the NCLB safe harbor provision had it also met the attendance target. Many of the study participants at the schools believed student performance would have been better if students had not faced relatively long bus rides.

“Given all that we had done, we felt like we were being punished rather than rewarded,” said one teacher interviewed at BEST. At King, the faculty was “pretty devastated,” said Principal Melody Morgan, “but you have to keep a positive attitude and show people where they made tremendous gains.” Staff at King and BEST felt they were placed at an unfair disadvantage for meeting the student attendance goal. Tameka Alexander, the literacy coach, noted that many of the students came from economically disadvantaged families and had no other transportation if they missed the bus.

In 2008-09, after the schools were housed in their permanent sites in the students’ neighborhood, staff interviewed at both schools felt optimistic about their progress. “My staff knows that just working a little bit harder, we’re going to make those gains,” said Morgan. “I’m sure we’ll make them this year.” Morgan’s prediction proved true: both schools made AYP based on 2008-09 testing. The schools will need to make AYP again to exit restructuring entirely.

### A Need for More Time

Many case study participants said they had faith that the strategies they were implementing in their restructuring schools would work, given more time. In a few cases, the “too early” hypothesis already appears to be justified. Two of the schools in which staff had expressed a need for more time made AYP based on 2008-09 testing.

At New Highland Elementary School in Oakland, California, administrators reported focusing their efforts during the schools’ first year on creating a positive school climate. “Last year was really about teaching the core values that we’ve adopted, ‘be kind, work hard, get smart, talk it out,’ and making sure we had a coherent discipline plan and system of classroom management,” said Principal Liz Ozol. The school also began an arts integration program and collaborated with a number of community arts organizations. In 2006-07 the school increased its percentage of students scoring proficient by about five points in English language arts (ELA) and seven in math, although students still fell short of AYP targets in ELA.

In 2007-08, with a more positive culture in place, New Highland focused more tightly on academics, Ozol said. The school piloted standards-based interim assessments developed by New Leaders for New Schools, a federally funded nonprofit organization. Partly as a result of using the new assessments, teachers realized their students needed individualized instruction, said Ally Wray-Kirk, New Highland’s teaching and learning coordinator. At that point the school switched from a year-long focus on writing to a year-long focus on differentiating instruction. Wray-Kirk and Ozol said the new school’s emphasis on collaborative planning made it possible for teachers to set the direction for the school and use their strengths to support one another.

Despite all this activity, New Highland did not make AYP based on 2007-08 testing. Still, Ozol remained optimistic that the reforms would pay off in the future. “Our eyes are on safe harbor,” she said, referring to the NCLB provision that enables schools to make AYP if they decrease the percentage of students scoring below proficient by 10% or more. Ozol’s faith appeared to be well founded: the school made AYP through safe harbor the following year based on 2008-09 testing.

Study participants at North Tahoe Middle School in California’s Tahoe Truckee Unified district had similar convictions that they were on the right track, even though the percentages of students scoring proficient declined in 2007-08. “Last year’s work was a step in the right direction for us,” said Principal Teresa Rensch in 2008-09. “But obviously we didn’t have all the pieces in play yet.”

Rensch attributed the decline in state test scores to a new system for tracking student achievement; in her view, the system worked for the students whose achievement was being tracked with “learning logs” in 2007-08 but not for the rest of the school. These learning logs recorded the progress of students who had scored below proficient on state tests at the beginning of the year and the interventions they received when they had not learned the material. When end-of-year state tests showed a decline in the overall percentage proficient, the district found that most of the students who had been below proficient moved up, but an even larger number of students who started the year as proficient moved down. “We discovered we did a piece of it really well. It was really effective for students with learning logs,” said Rensch. “But the kids that were proficient dropped.” During 2008-09 the school focused on all students. “When one group’s getting retaught, we have enrichment for the kids who got it,” she explained.

School year 2008-09 also saw the continuation of a number of district and school improvement efforts at North Tahoe Middle, including the use of instructional coaches, weekly professional development for teachers, extra instruction in ELA and math for struggling students, and a districtwide “collaborative inquiry” initiative in which staff participate in discussions, identify student learning problems, and formulate strategies to address these problems. Some study participants predicted that continuing these reforms would enable the school to make AYP, which proved to be true based on 2008-09 testing.

Our case studies in Central Islip Union Free School District in New York also suggest that some schools may need more time to fully implement reforms. Reed Middle School began restructuring in 2006-07 and Central Islip Senior High in 2007-08. Both schools implemented small learning communities, as well as district and school-level reforms, and both experienced some resistance to these reforms from staff.

After a rocky start with small learning communities, Reed got a new principal in 2007-08. At this point, staff began to work together more closely. School climate and student achievement began to improve. Getting teacher buy-in was the key to that success, insisted Christopher Brown, the new principal. He explained that all the school’s new reading and writing strategies were proposed by the teacher-led literacy

team. “That’s the reason why we’re making strides here—the teachers took ownership. They did it themselves.” After three years of restructuring, the school exited NCLB improvement based on 2008-09 testing.

Central Islip Senior High made a similar move to small learning communities in 2008-09. Here, too, the first year was rough. The first obstacle was space. The school’s nonprofit partner in restructuring advised the school that each academy should occupy its own section of the building, but the building’s configuration made that impossible, and students were scattered. A second obstacle was the teachers’ union contract, which held that teachers could not take on a period of advising students, as called for in the restructuring plan, without dropping a class period. The district was unable to fund the extra positions to make that happen. A third obstacle was scheduling. Teachers in each learning community were supposed to have common planning time that would be used in part for professional development. But scheduling this community planning time was impossible while the rest of the building was still organized by departments that needed their own common planning time.

In 2009-10, the school made time for teachers to meet in their small learning communities by eliminating common planning time during the day for academic departments, according to Principal Franklin Caesar. Instead, teachers meet by department once a month after school for professional development or planning specific to their subject area, an arrangement permitted by the union contract. Student advising sessions take place two or three afternoons each week, and the extra pay for participating teachers is being covered by a three-year grant recently awarded to the school to extend its school day.

In the spring of 2009, Denise Lowe, Central Islip’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, anticipated two more years of hard work before the high school is out of restructuring, but she said that overall she is pleased with the school’s progress. Allowing more time to implement smaller learning communities in Central Islip Senior High appears to make sense in New York.

But how long is too long to wait for a reform to work? Certainly, a recent review of school improvement research suggests that it takes about five years to fully



implement new initiatives (Fixsen et al., 2005). The experiences of educators in our studies also suggest that staying the course with a reform should be an active process. New Highland Elementary, North Tahoe Middle, and Central Islip Senior High did not simply make a single effort at reform and then step back and let the chips fall where they may. Instead, while “waiting,” the schools continued to refine and intensify their reforms. Without this type of continued effort some schools in our studies have made less progress thus far.

### A Need for More Information

In a few cases, school and district officials were not able to clearly articulate why their improvement efforts had failed to produce the expected results at restructuring schools. Deeper analysis of student achievement data and school needs assessments might help these schools understand and address barriers to improving student achievement.

For example, at Education for Change Cox Elementary in Oakland, which became a charter school in 2005-06 as its restructuring strategy, student achievement has remained flat. In 2006-07, Principal Michael Scott said he was not sure why test scores had not improved. “We sought quality instruction and had an excellent system of professional development and coaching support,” he said. “To be quite honest with you, I don’t know why we didn’t do better.” Scott noted that in mid-September of 2006-07, he and his staff were still combing through the testing data for more answers. Scott left the school in 2007-08, and achievement has increased slightly since then but not enough for the school to make AYP.

## What Have We Learned from Our State-Level Research about the Impact of NCLB and Related State Policies on State Efforts to Improve Schools?

Through our state-level research on restructuring and CEP’s broader research on No Child Left Behind, we have learned a great deal over the past five years about the impact of NCLB and related state policies on state efforts to support schools in improvement. This information comes from hundreds of interviews with state, district, and local educators; reviews of state, district,

and school documents related to NCLB; and analyses of state test data. Drawing from these sources, we have identified several aspects of NCLB that have not produced the desired gains in achievement or that appear to have hindered school improvement efforts. We have also seen how some states have taken advantage of the flexibility in NCLB law and evolving federal guidance to adopt policies to better support schools identified for improvement. Finally, we have consistently heard from state and local officials about the need for more funding for school improvement. The recent increase in federal dollars for this purpose represents an opportunity to put in practice several promising strategies and supports, and we recommended ways to maximize the impact of these funds.

**Finding: States use different policies to identify schools for improvement and restructuring, resulting in uneven numbers of identified schools across states.**

States use different criteria to determine whether schools have made AYP and to identify schools for improvement and restructuring. A recent study that compared accountability systems in 28 states found that a school identified for NCLB improvement in one state might not be in improvement if it were located in another state (Cronin et al., 2009). As a result of these variations, the number of schools identified for improvement is uneven across states for reasons unrelated to their relative quality of education. This patchwork of results may confuse the public about the quality of their schools compared with those in other states.

These differences in state accountability systems occur partly because states are allowed, with approval from ED, to set their own yearly student performance targets that schools and districts must reach to make AYP. The six states that participated in our restructuring studies had very different targets for the percentages of students who must score at or above the proficient level on state tests. In elementary reading, for example, the targets for 2007-08 ranged from 35.2% proficient in all elementary grades in California to 77.0% proficient for grade 3 students in Ohio; in high school math, they ranged from 32.2% proficient in California to 74.9% proficient in Georgia (California Department of Education, 2006;

Georgia Department of Education, 2007; Ohio Department of Education, 2008). In addition, schools must also meet other AYP targets, including a 95% testing participation target and state-determined attendance and graduation rate targets that also vary by state.

Not only do the targets vary by state, but state tests themselves differ in their content, difficulty, format, and scoring scales. Studies released by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2007 and 2009 mapped states' cut scores for proficient performance on their state tests onto the scoring scales of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for the same year and found great variation among states (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Bandeira de Mello, Blankenship, & McLaughlin, 2009). This suggests that some states' tests are more difficult than others. In addition, states have developed different standards that outline the content students are expected to learn. Given these differences, one cannot assume that schools in a state like California, which has relatively low percentage proficient targets, have an easier time meeting their state's targets than schools in states like Georgia or Ohio do.

Finally, the number of schools in improvement, particularly in the restructuring stage, depends partly on the status of a state's accountability system in 2002, when NCLB was signed into law. As noted above, some states, including the six in our studies, already had well-established accountability systems at that point and had already identified schools for improvement under prior federal law, so their schools reached the restructuring stage earlier than those other states.

These state variations affect the number of schools in restructuring and make it problematic to compare these numbers in different states or judge the quality of any school in a national context. This unevenness across states also means that some states must spread their federal school improvement dollars and state supports over large numbers of schools, which may hinder school improvement efforts, while other states can provide more federal funding and state supports to a smaller number of schools.

**Finding: Some states have identified an unmanageable number of schools for restructuring, and many schools remain stuck in restructuring.**

Across the nation, 5,017 schools that receive federal Title I funds were in the planning or implementation phases of restructuring in school year 2008-09, according to data from an analysis of Consolidated State Performance Reports by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2009a). This is about 9% of all Title I schools in the nation.<sup>2</sup> The percentages of Title I schools in restructuring have increased steadily in the past three years, from about 4% in 2006-07, to about 7% in 2007-08, to 9% in 2008-09 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a; 2008b). For the reasons described above, these schools are not evenly distributed among states. In some states, the number of schools identified for restructuring has become so large that states and districts lack the capacity to provide financial and technical support for their improvement efforts.

For example, in California, Wendy Harris, the former assistant superintendent for school improvement, said in 2007-08 that "it would be almost unfathomable" for the state department of education to develop the capacity to monitor each school in restructuring. Instead, California, like several of the states we studied, turns to regional and private entities to help monitor and support schools in restructuring.

**Table 2** shows the numbers of schools in restructuring for the 25 states in the country with the most restructuring schools, including the six states we studied. The numbers in this table come from the aforementioned ED analysis of the Consolidated State Performance Reports for most states and from CEP's studies of restructuring schools for the six participating states. Because many states periodically revise their numbers of restructuring schools based on data reviews and appeals, school closures, and changes in Title I status, the exact number of restructuring schools changes slightly throughout the school year. For example, in three of the six states CEP studied, the numbers that the state reported to CEP differed slightly from the numbers reported in ED's analysis. Therefore, the numbers of schools in restructuring reported in this table represent our best estimate of the actual numbers.

<sup>2</sup> CEP calculated the percentages in this paragraph based on the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics (Hoffman, 2009), which indicate there were 58,027 Title I schools in the nation in 2006-07.

**Table 2. Numbers of Title I schools in restructuring planning or implementation in 2008-09**

State	Restructuring Schools
California	1,180*
Florida	640
Illinois	358
New York	251*
Massachusetts	205
New Mexico	170
Ohio	148*
Pennsylvania	134
South Carolina	108
New Jersey	100
Arkansas	90
North Carolina	87
Connecticut	77
Alaska	70
Hawaii	69
Michigan	71*
Missouri	65
Georgia	61*
Louisiana	57
Texas	56
Colorado	52
Maryland	45*
Arizona	49
Kentucky	47
Washington	44

Table reads: In 2008-09, California had 1,180 schools in the planning or implementation phases of NCLB restructuring.

\* Data were taken from CEP reports rather than from the U.S. Department of Education.

Sources: CEP, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d; 2009e; 2009f; and U.S. Department of Education, 2009a.

As discussed in the previous section, these 25 states have more schools in restructuring than other states for reasons that may have nothing to do with their relative student achievement. Therefore, table 2 should not be viewed as reflecting the quality of a state's educational system, but rather as a source of information about the numbers of schools that states and districts must work to improve dramatically, according to NCLB requirements.

Federal law does not require states to track or report the numbers of schools that remain in the implementation phase of restructuring after multiple years (those in year 5 of NCLB improvement or beyond). Among the six states we studied, all but California report the number of schools in year 6 of improvement or beyond. California does not officially report this number but instead groups schools in year 6 and beyond with those in year 5. **Table 3** shows the numbers of schools by years of restructuring—year 4 of improvement or above—in the states we studied. We estimated California's numbers based on historical lists of schools in improvement on the state Web site. National numbers for schools in the later years of restructuring are not readily available.

**Finding: Federal options for restructuring do not appear promising, and all the states we studied have moved away from these options.**

NCLB spells out five options for restructuring, listed in **table 4**. Our interviews with state and local officials indicate that over time the six states studied have shifted their focus away from these federal restructuring options and toward their own unique state approaches. This may be a positive development. CEP studies in the previous two years found that none of the federal restructuring options was associated with schools making AYP (CEP, 2008g). Another recent summary of restructuring research similarly concluded there was little or no evidence that federal options improved schools (Mathis, 2009). Furthermore, the federal Institute of Education Science's best practice guide for turning around chronically low-performing schools did not include these federal strategies and instead recommended the use of other strategies (Herman et al., 2008).

**Table 3. Title I schools in the planning phase of restructuring or beyond in six states, 2008-09**

State	Numbers of Schools by Year of NCLB Improvement						Total
	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	
California	265	369	246	117	173	10	1,180
Georgia	19	11	8	10	10	3	61
Maryland	3	7	0	0	4	31	45
Michigan	19	35	7	6	3	1	71
New York	50	50	33	50	53	15	251
Ohio	67	51	8	16	3	3	148

Table reads: In 2008-09, California had 265 Title I schools in year 4 of school improvement (restructuring planning), 369 schools in year 5 (the first year of restructuring implementation), 246 schools in year 6, 117 schools in year 7, 173 schools in year 8, and 10 schools in year 9.

Sources: CEP, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d; 2009e; 2009f.

**Table 4. Percentages of schools in restructuring implementation in six states that reported using various federal options in 2007-08**

Federal Restructuring Option	CA	GA	MD*	MI	NY†	OH†
Undertaking any other major restructuring of the school's governance that produces fundamental reform	90%	96%	83%	90%	87%	96%
Replacing all or most of the staff who are relevant to the failure to make AYP	13%	2%	14%	11%	13%	23%
Entering into a contract to have an outside organization with a record of effectiveness operate the school	10%	2%	2%	0%	0%	2%
Reopening the school as a charter school	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%
Turning the school over to the state, if the state agrees	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Table reads: In 2007-08, 90% of California's schools in restructuring implementation chose the federal option of undertaking any other major restructuring of the school's governance that produces fundamental reform.

\* Percentages in Maryland and Ohio include both Title I and non-Title I schools; these states require both types of schools to implement restructuring.

† Percentages in New York include only schools that entered restructuring in 2007-08, since these were the only schools for which New York collected this information.

Note: Columns do not total 100% because some schools chose more than one restructuring option.

Sources: CEP analysis of unpublished data from the state departments of education in California, Michigan, and Ohio; and CEP, 2008c, 2009b, and 2009f.

While the states in our studies have become less reliant on these federal strategies to improve schools, they still track their school's choices. As table 4 shows, an overwhelming majority of restructuring schools in the six states studied have chosen the “any-other” option, which allows schools and districts to undertake any major action in the school's governance structure (aside from the four other options specified in the law) that will produce fundamental reform. None of these six states allows districts to turn schools over to the state. State officials in California, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, and New York said that the state does not have the capacity to run these restructuring schools. In Georgia, this option is not permitted under state law, which requires each school district to remain under the autonomous control of a local board of education.

Statewide systems of support for schools in the last stage of improvement have changed a great deal over time in the six states we studied. These states may be part of a trend, which can be seen nationally, to rethink the sanctions and supports associated with NCLB and give less emphasis to the federal options. In March 2008, the U.S. Department of Education launched a competition for states to submit proposals to participate in a differentiated accountability pilot program. The stated aim of the program was to allow participating states “to vary the intensity and type of interventions to match the academic reasons that led to a school's identification” for improvement, including interventions for schools in restructuring, and to target “resources and interventions to those schools most in need of intensive interventions and significant reform” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008c). In July 2008, ED approved six states to participate in the pilot program—Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, and Ohio. In January 2009, ED approved three more states for the pilots—Arkansas, Louisiana, and New York.

As described in more detail in a related CEP report (2009g), four of the states we studied—Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Ohio—are participating in the differentiated accountability pilots. These states have certainly changed their strategies for restructuring. In Ohio and Maryland, some schools or districts may pick one of the federal options as a part of a broader set of reform requirements. Georgia and New York, on the other hand, no longer require schools in

the last stage of improvement to choose a federal option but instead direct them to implement a collection of state-designated strategies.

In addition, California and Michigan—the two states we studied that are not participating in the differentiated accountability pilots—have used the existing flexibility in NCLB law and federal guidance to shift away from the federal options and make changes similar to those found in the states officially piloting differentiated accountability.

We identified four areas of similarity among the new approaches in the six states, discussed in the next four findings.

**Finding: All six states have begun targeting supports to the most academically needy schools or districts.**

Since the passage of NCLB, many have questioned states' capacity to sanction and support all the schools identified for improvement. As discussed previously, in some states this is particularly problematic since there are an unmanageable number of schools identified for restructuring. In CEP's 2007 survey of all 50 states, 32 reported that insufficient numbers of staff challenged their capacity to administer all required NCLB assessments, while the same number said that inadequate state funds posed a similar capacity challenge. Over two-thirds of the responding states (36 states) reported that inadequate federal funding challenged their capacity to administer all required assessments to a moderate or great extent (CEP, 2007d). In addition, in a recent survey by the American Institutes for Research, many states officials concurred that their states have limited capacity to support schools in improvement (LeFloch, Boyle, & Therriault, 2008). The AIR survey found that in the face of limited resources, 38 states were differentiating supports for schools in improvement to give more supports to some schools and less to others. Similarly, the six states in our studies have recently shifted their resources to focus on what they perceive as their neediest schools, partly in response to limited capacity. These shifts occurred both in the four states participating in the differentiated accountability pilots and in the two states not participating.



Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Ohio all now use differentiated accountability pilots to offer more support to schools that missed AYP targets for students as a whole (the “all-students” group) and less support to schools that missed AYP targets for fewer subgroups. Two of the states with differentiated accountability, Georgia and Maryland, differentiate supports only for schools in particular years of improvement. In Georgia, differentiated supports apply just to schools in year 3 of improvement (the corrective action phase) and year 4 (restructuring planning). Schools in this state that come closer to making AYP are given more autonomy in crafting their school improvement plans, while the lowest-performing schools must follow corrective actions selected by the state. Meanwhile, Maryland schools in years 1 through 3 of improvement that have failed to make AYP because one or two subgroups fell short or because schools did not meet targets for attendance, graduation, or other AYP indicators are called “focused” schools and are subject to fewer state requirements, which leaves more resources for needier schools, including those in restructuring.

Similarly, in New York supports for schools vary primarily by level of improvement and, in a few instances, by category of academic need (basic, focused, comprehensive). For example, “basic” schools are allowed to do a self-assessment, while “focused” or “comprehensive” schools must undergo an assessment by an outside team. New York also identifies schools that are “furthest from state standards” as determined by the state Commissioner of Education. These “schools under registration review” (SURR) might be in any stage of school improvement but are often schools in restructuring. All SURR schools are assigned a state education department liaison, who provides on-site technical assistance at least one day per month.

In contrast, Ohio increases state supports based on the percentage of AYP targets met rather than the length of time a school has been in improvement. Ohio districts and their schools are generally expected to move through the Ohio school improvement process as a unit. Ohio districts in district improvement are categorized in one of three ways: low-, medium-, or high-support, based on the aggregate percentage of students not meeting AYP targets across the district. Generally,

the categories do not take into account the number of years a district and its schools spend in the improvement process. However, to ensure schools in restructuring receive adequate support, Ohio categorizes any district with at least one school in NCLB restructuring as medium- or high-support.

Although California and Michigan are not participating in ED’s differentiated accountability pilots, both have also refined their state supports for schools in restructuring. Like Ohio, California decided to focus supports on districts rather than individual schools in 2007-08 and 2008-09. The districts with the most severe and pervasive problems, according to state criteria, received extra funds and had to spend them in part to contract with a state-approved District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) provider. The DAIT assessed district needs and issued a report on district capacity, including recommendations for improvement. The DAIT then provided technical assistance to facilitate district implementation of the recommendations, which could include reallocation of existing resources. While the state’s direct intervention focused on improving structures and processes in districts, it was intended over time to improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement at the school level. California may be revising this approach in school year 2009-10.

One way Michigan differentiates state supports for restructuring schools is by conducting audits, and then using Process Mentor Teams to help schools implement the findings of the audits. (These teams include a district-level person, a representative from the Michigan Department of Education, and a person from the district’s Intermediate School District, a regional technical assistance agency.) Many schools in Michigan have exited restructuring based on this approach, and officials said it was time to use earlier differentiation to prevent schools from entering restructuring. In 2007-08, most of these services started when schools entered year 3 of school improvement. In 2008-09, Michigan began to deliver these services earlier in the improvement process. Process Mentor Teams now begin in year 1 of improvement, targeted audits in year 2, and comprehensive audits in year 3.



**Finding: All six states have leveraged additional support for schools in improvement by relying on partnerships with other agencies and organizations.**

Partly in response to limited capacity to monitor and support schools, the six states in our studies have partnered with outside organizations to help provide resources to restructuring schools. The types of organizations vary from state to state but include government organizations, such as regional educational agencies, as well as nonprofit and for-profit groups that specialize in technical assistance and professional development for educators.

In Georgia, most of the on-site assistance to restructuring schools is done by employees of the state department of education. In developing training, however, the state drew upon the work of an outside organization. To help districts select a federal restructuring option, the Georgia Department of Education holds annual training sessions for district representatives. In 2007-08, that training followed a guide developed by Learning Point Associates and commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (Learning Point Associates, 2006). The guide leads district leaders through a process that helps them decide whether widespread problems at a school justify major changes, such a new staff or governance structure, or a more focused effort. It also helps them judge their district's capacity to support each potential choice.

Maryland and Ohio have created new entities within their own departments of education to help improve schools and have partnered with outside organizations to design the work of these entities. The Maryland State Department of Education is developing a Breakthrough Center, with funding and assistance from Mass Insight, a Boston-based nonprofit focused on turning around low-performing schools. By design, this Center will be the state's primary conduit to support schools as they look for interventions to address their priority needs. The Center is intended to coordinate the delivery of services, broker services, and act as a repository for best practices and materials. "I think [the Breakthrough Center] is a great thing because it accomplishes several purposes," said Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state superintendent of schools. "When you have a large organization, there's always a

tendency for silos, and this really integrates services." According to Bob Glasscock, executive director of the Breakthrough Center, the Center is intended to help build capacity for continued improvement within schools and districts. Rather than simply providing resources or a menu of services from which a school or district will choose, the Center will engage with districts to collaboratively assess needs and develop improvement strategies.

Ohio's new differentiated accountability system was developed with assistance from a variety of external partners, including the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, a professional organization for educational leaders in Ohio; the Leadership and Learning Center, a national for-profit professional development provider; the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates, one of the 16 nationally funded regional assistance centers; and the Center for Special Needs Populations at Ohio State University. The new differentiated accountability system created state diagnostic teams that assess the needs of struggling districts and schools. The teams are made up of part-time state employees who help districts and schools conduct their initial data analysis. High-support districts and schools are required by the new differentiated accountability system to use these diagnostic teams. For medium-support districts and schools, the teams are encouraged but optional.

While Ohio, Georgia, and Maryland keep most of their direct serves for school improvement within their state departments of education, Michigan primarily uses regional technical assistance providers—specifically, Intermediate School Districts and Regional Educational Service Agencies. Both organizations are state-funded and were created to assist schools in their regions. The organizations provide leadership coaches who assist principals of restructuring schools and who remain at the school site for at least 100 days. The organizations also are represented on each restructuring school's Process Mentor Team. The umbrella organization for these regional providers, the Michigan Association for Intermediate School Districts (MAISA), has assumed a growing role in improving schools. In the spring of 2009, MAISA began to train school teams on data-driven needs assessment, help schools select research-based interventions to address identified needs, and support faithful implementation of these interventions through instructional coaches.

Finally, the Michigan Department of Education partners with Michigan State University to provide intensive summer training, followed by ongoing professional development, for the principals of restructuring schools, the schools' leadership coaches, and teams of teachers.

California took perhaps the most diverse approach to seeking partners to improve schools by contracting primarily with private providers of improvement services in 2007-08 and 2008-09. Under state law, the California Department of Education is responsible for identifying organizations to provide District Assistance and Intervention Team services and individuals within those organizations to lead DAIT teams. Potential providers had to apply and demonstrate their expertise in addressing all academic subject areas, meeting the needs of special groups such as English language learners and students with disabilities, and building district capacity. Government agencies, as well as for-profit and nonprofit organizations, were approved as DAIT providers. About 61% of the 38 state-approved providers in 2007-08 and 2008-09 were public agencies, while 39% were private organizations. Of these private providers, 5 were for-profits and 10 were nonprofits.

In the summer of 2009, New York was in the process of issuing a new request for proposals (RFP) to provide services to schools in improvement, including those in restructuring. In the past, these services were provided by seven Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs), which New York State created specifically to assist schools in improvement under NCLB. While the original RFP was open to all organizations, all but one of the RSSCs was housed within the state's regional Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), government entities that assist schools and districts in their region. The seventh RSSC was housed at the New York City Teacher Center, a professional development center of the United Federation of Teachers. As of the summer of 2009, the RFP had not yet been issued, so it was unclear whether RSSCs were likely to be housed in BOCES in the future.

**Finding: All six states have increased their use of needs assessments to diagnose challenges in restructuring schools.**

Using student assessment data and other types of school-level data, such as attendance and graduation rates, to inform decisions about instruction and other aspects of school improvement has become common practice. In CEP's 2007 survey of a nationally representative sample of school districts, 97% of district officials reported "increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions" to assist schools in NCLB improvement (CEP, 2007e). In addition, a synthesis of research on turning around failing schools and other organizations showed that successful leaders of these organizations frequently collected and analyzed data about organizational performance and made these data publicly available (Public Impact, 2007).

The six states in our studies have increased their requirements for districts and schools to use data. California, Georgia, and Ohio have stepped up these requirements specifically for schools and/or districts with greater academic needs. California encourages all schools to use student achievement data to make decisions and provides a number of state-created needs assessments. Over time, however, schools in improvement are required to do more. In California, the DAIT teams provide independent needs assessments and data analysis to districts with severe and pervasive problems, and School Assistance and Intervention Teams provide similar assessments for schools identified for improvement.

The new state efforts in New York, Maryland, and Michigan include more specific data requirements of all schools. Michigan begins formal audits of the improvement process in year 1 for schools that missed AYP targets for the all-students group and in year 2 for schools that missed AYP targets for specific subgroups. Michigan's aforementioned Process Mentor Teams help schools interpret the audits and make plans for improvement.

**Finding: All six states have expanded on-site monitoring or visits to restructuring schools.**

Typically, states have not had difficulty gathering the school improvement plans required of schools identified for restructuring, but many states may lack the capacity to ensure these plans are well implemented in all restructuring schools. In a 2007 survey by the Government Accountability Office, 40% of restructuring schools reported that they did not use any of the five required federal restructuring options. The six states we studied have taken advantage of the new differentiated accountability pilots or the flexibility in NCLB law and federal guidance to require on-site monitoring or visits to at least some schools in improvement.

Georgia, Michigan, and New York require some type of on-site visit for all schools in restructuring. In Michigan, restructuring schools all have formal audits and receive visits from Process Mentor Teams; schools in restructuring planning receive eight visits, while schools in restructuring implementation receive four visits.

California, Maryland, and Ohio require on-site visits for some but not all schools in restructuring. In California, districts in corrective action that the state determines have the greatest needs receive formal visits. During these visits, an outside provider conducts a needs assessment and issues a report on district capacity that includes recommendations for improvement. Many of the targeted districts have schools in restructuring.

**Finding: New funding for Title I school improvement grants may help restructuring schools improve.**

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by NCLB, includes two sources of federal funding designed to assist districts and schools identified for improvement, including restructuring schools. The first is the 4% set-aside of funds for school improvement authorized by section 1003(a).<sup>3</sup> The second is a separate authorization of funds for school improvement grants in section 1003(g); funds were first appropriated under this authority for school year 2007-08. **Table 5** shows the amount of funds available for 2007-08 and 2008-09 under each of these sources for the states we studied.

**Table 5. Federal funding for school improvement in six states**

State	2007-08			2008-09		
	4% set-aside, Title I, 1003(a)	Improvement grants, Title I, 1003(g)	Total	4% set-aside, Title I, 1003(a)	Improvement grants, Title I, 1003(g)	Total
CA	\$33 million	\$16 million	\$49 million	\$68 million	\$62 million	\$130 million
GA	\$17 million	\$4 million	\$21 million	\$14 million	\$16 million	\$30 million
MD	\$7 million	\$2 million	\$9 million	\$7 million	\$7 million	\$14 million
MI	\$17 million	\$4 million	\$21 million	\$20 million	\$19 million	\$39 million
NY	\$48 million	\$12 million	\$60 million	\$49 million	\$41 million	\$90 million
OH	\$18 million	\$4 million	\$22 million	\$20 million	\$18 million	\$38 million

Table reads: In California, approximately \$33 million was available for school improvement in 2007-08 under the Title I 4% set-aside in section 1003(a), and \$16 million was available for this purpose under the separately authorized school improvement grants in section 1003(g). A total of \$49 million was available for school improvement from both sources in 2007-08.

Sources: CEP, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d; 2009e; 2009f.

<sup>3</sup> Although all states are required to set aside 4%, some have not been able to do so in recent years because of a hold-harmless provision in Title I, as amended by NCLB. This situation is explained in more detail in a CEP report on state Title I allocations (2008f).

For school year 2009-10, a national total of \$3.5 billion has been appropriated for section 1003(g) school improvement grants—\$3 billion through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and \$500 million through the regular ED appropriations bill. ED has developed new, more specific draft requirements for how the portion of this money appropriated through ARRA will be used.

This substantial increase in funding is likely to be welcomed by state and local educators. Throughout our studies of school restructuring, almost all participants have called for more federal funding to improve low-performing schools.

As states, districts, and schools make plans to use this additional funding, it is pertinent to consider how federal funds for improving schools have been used in past years. All six states in our studies sent a portion of their section 1003(a) funds to districts, which in turn distributed these funds to schools. The six states also reserved a small amount for state-level activities as allowed by NCLB. Georgia, Michigan, and New York sent a portion to regional agencies, which then provided services to schools in improvement. In Maryland these funds went to schools in the later stages of improvement. California used the funds for districts that were in corrective action and had been identified by the state as having the greatest academic challenges. Similarly, Ohio targeted school improvement funds to districts with the greatest numbers and percentages of students that failed to meet AYP targets, regardless of how many schools in the district were in improvement or how long they had been that status. Maryland, Georgia, and New York supplemented the federal funds for school improvement with state funds.

States also differed on how they used the school improvement grants under section 1003(g). Georgia, New York, and Ohio pooled these grants with their section 1003(a) funds to support activities already underway in the state. California had intended to use these funds in the same way as the 1003(a) funds but is awaiting ED approval of its revised plan.

Maryland used the 1003(g) grants to implement a process it calls Restructuring Implementation Technical Assistance (RITA) in 17 restructuring Title I schools in Baltimore City that had struggled the longest with school improvement. After participating in the RITA

technical assistance visits and setting priorities based on the RITA feedback, the schools received 1003(g) money to implement their plans. In late 2008, the state issued a request for proposals to all of the remaining districts with schools in improvement. Although these schools did not undergo the RITA process, they performed a comprehensive needs assessment to determine which improvements they would make using 1003(g) funds. Schools with funded proposals were eligible to receive between \$50,000 and \$250,000.

Michigan used its section 1003(g) funds to hire the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators to train school teams on data-driven needs assessment, help schools select targeted interventions based on research, and support implementation through instructional coaches. The project serves schools in years 1 and 2 of NCLB improvement. If successful, it will expand to all Title I schools in improvement.

## What Advice Can We Offer about Using the \$3.5 Billion for School Improvement Grants?

The increases in Title I funding described above make the coming years an excellent time to expand school improvement efforts. Education administrators and policymakers have a unique opportunity to try new approaches and focus more resources on America's lowest-performing schools. The findings in this report can help guide these efforts at the federal, state, and local levels. Our recommendations are explained below.

**Recommendation:** Federal policymakers should consider raising or waiving the 5% cap on the amount of Title I funds states can reserve for state support to schools in improvement but should allow flexibility in the types of specific actions states take to assist schools.

As discussed previously, several national studies have found that many states lack the capacity to support schools in improvement (CEP, 2007d; LeFloch, Boyle, & Theriault, 2008). Further, our studies of schools in restructuring have noted that in some states school improvement funding is spread over too many schools.



Currently, states are allowed to reserve 5% of the 4% set-aside for school improvement under 1003(a); these reserved funds are used for state-level activities that assist schools in improvement. ED has proposed that states similarly be allowed to reserve up to 5% of the new school improvement grants under 1003(g) for state-level activities. Increasing the cap on the state reserve for school improvement would ensure that states, particularly those with very limited capacity, have sufficient funds to carry out promising strategies for assisting low-performing schools. Because none of the state-level strategies we studied is supported by an extensive research base as of yet, the federal government should not mandate any particular approach but rather should allow experimentation accompanied by evaluations.

**Recommendation: States should consider using their portion of federal school improvement funds to experiment with promising practices identified in CEP studies.**

ED's draft requirements for using the school improvement grants appropriated through ARRA call on states to identify a new set of schools to receive grants, review and approve applications from districts, review and approve the district's three-year student achievement goals, and allocate funds in accordance with regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b). According to our research in six states, some states believe more should be done. Based on our research, states should consider using their portion of these grants to experiment with promising practices such as the following:

- Targeting supports to the most academically needy schools
- Building partnerships with regional government agencies and other organizations to support direct technical assistance to restructuring schools
- Increasing the use of needs assessment to help diagnose schools' challenges and plan improvement
- Increasing on-site visits to restructuring schools

These state actions would help ensure that activities supported by school improvement grants are well thought out and implemented as intended.

**Recommendation: Schools and districts should tailor their improvement efforts to individual school needs.**

Section 1003(g) school improvement grants will be used primarily by districts and schools. Our research has shown that no single restructuring strategy guarantees success, and that schools may benefit from well-coordinated, multifaceted approaches to school improvement that evolve over time in response to local conditions.

To some extent, ED's draft requirements for using school improvement funding appropriated through ARRA recognize the need for multifaceted reforms; in this respect, they improve on the five restructuring options in NCLB law (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b). In particular, two of the four new options proposed for school improvement include multiple reforms. The first option, the "turnaround model," involves replacing staff, adopting a new governance structure, and implementing a new curriculum. The second option, the "transformational model," involves developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, replacing staff, implementing instructional reform strategies, extending learning and teacher planning time, creating community-oriented schools, and providing operating flexibility and sustained support.

The other two options, the "restart" and "school closure" models, are not much different from the options originally laid out under NCLB. The restart model is essentially the same as the previous, little-used option of becoming a charter school, an approach whose effectiveness is questionable according to some current research (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009; Zimmer, et al., 2009). Although closing schools is not an official federal restructuring option, it has always been one way of reducing the numbers of schools in restructuring. For example, five of the schools originally in our case studies have closed. Adding this option will allow better tracking of the numbers of schools that close in response to NCLB. Accurate tracking is especially important since recent research in Chicago showed that students leaving closed schools typically reenrolled in other lower-performing district schools (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009).

Although the options in ED's draft requirements represent an improvement on those in NCLB, they overstep the traditional federal role in which the federal government helps ensure the equality of educational opportunity but plays a limited role in the daily operation of districts and schools (CEP, 1999). Because these options contain specific directives that are not supported by research, it is unclear whether they will help ensure equal educational opportunity. In implementing the federal options, school and district leaders should carefully consider their actions. While they must follow the regulations, they should also consider the lessons of our case study schools. Their improvement efforts should be based on individual school needs and might include the following:

- Using multiple, coordinated reform strategies that are well matched to the needs of the school and students
- Evaluating and revising reform efforts over time in response to school and student needs
- Analyzing data frequently and using it to regroup students for instruction
- Replacing staff, but only if the school or district has a large pool of applicants, a plan or vision for the school that allows it to overcome its past reputation as a “failing” school, help from the union to resolve stumbling blocks in the contract, and effective hiring systems that do not rely on principals alone to recruit and interview applicants

**Recommendation: Local, state, and federal support of schools that exit restructuring should continue for several years afterward.**

Dedicated federal and state funding for schools that have recently exited restructuring would ensure that supports and reforms undertaken by these schools will continue and will evolve after they exit restructuring. Study participants from schools that exited restructuring were typically concerned about maintaining student achievement to avoid slipping back into school improvement—a fear that is all too real, given the experience of one of our case study schools. Resources for these schools would also give them more time to fully implement reforms and help them maintain high levels of student achievement.

**Recommendation: Local, state, and federal officials should join forces to evaluate improvement strategies.**

Until we, as a nation, understand more fully how to improve low-performing schools, we must gather as much information as possible about the impact of school improvement strategies on school performance and student achievement and must refrain from forcing schools to implement unproven strategies. Toward this end, local educators should join with state and federal officials to evaluate the impact of the supports and strategies being undertaken for schools in improvement. Only with more specific knowledge can leaders create policies that help schools improve and avoid enacting policies that hinder improvement efforts.



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